

Sudan: the thieves fall out

by GWYNNE DYER

It's a pity that both sides can't lose in the war that broke out between rival generals in Sudan on Saturday, but the best that the 48 million Sudanese can hope for now is that one side loses quickly. Beyond that, it's all bad: the rival generals both want to strangle the democratic revolution that began in the streets of Khartoum four years ago.

It was a long overdue revolution. The previous military dictator, Omar al-Bashir, was in power for thirty years, waging constant wars against minority groups and handing huge chunks of the economy over to military interests while civilian living standards stagnated.

He created the Janjaweed, an ethnic militia, to destroy rebels in the western province of Darfur, and wound up indicted by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for genocide. He stole at least \$9 billion.

The revolution that overthrew him in 2019 was a spontaneous popular uprising driven by idealistic students and the exhausted commercial and professional classes of Khartoum. The military dumped Bashir and jailed him for corruption, but they also forced the rebels to join a 'Transitional Military Council' (TMC) with them. Jailing Bashir kept him out of the hands of the ICC, whose investigators might link other generals to his crimes. The TMC deal forced the democratic movement to accept a two-year delay before free elections. But the Sudanese generals were really waiting for billions in help to arrive from other nervous dictatorships in the region like Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

By 2021, \$3 billion of financial aid from Egypt, the UAE and Saudi Arabia had duly arrived, and the senior military officer on the TMC pulled the plug on 'power-sharing' with the civilians. General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan declared on TV that the military would 'stop negotiating with the Alliance for Freedom and Change and cancel what had been agreed on.' Burhan had to kill a lot of civilians to make them accept this betrayal, of course, and he worried that his own soldiers, who had been fraternising with civilians on the streets for the previous two years, might refuse to massacre them. He solved that problem by bringing the Janjaweed to town, now renamed the 'Rapid Support Forces' (RSF).

The commander of the RSF, 'General' Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, commonly known as 'Hemeti', was already a power in the land second only to Burhan. The RSF is essentially Hemeti's own private army, and killing a few hundred people on the streets of Khartoum was no big deal to a man who slaughtered tens of thousands in Darfur, so he was happy to help. Burhan, the chief thief, and 'Hemeti', now No.2 in the regime as a reward for his help in the 2021 coup, should have been able to cooperate in some lying promise about an election in a few years, and renege on it later. Amazingly, they couldn't even manage that.

Burhan has already had decades to make his pile, while Hemeti, despite all his gold mines in Darfur, feels he is just getting started. So Burhan's plan to 'integrate' the RSF into the army within two years (which would destroy Hemeti's power base) was completely unacceptable to the assistant thief. He wanted ten years so the thieves fell out.

The fighting is happening all over the country, because both the army and the RSF are everywhere. At the time of writing it's hard to tell which side will win, but it's also hard to care. Both men have a lot of Sudanese blood on their hands, and neither has the skill to run even a dictatorship efficiently.

The one thing we can say with confidence at this point is that it is not an 'African' problem. Civilian rule has taken a beating in the Sahel belt of Africa recently, but democracy, however imperfect, is still a reality or a live prospect in most of sub-Saharan Africa.

The Sudanese, or at least the dominant ethnic groups there, still see the country as part of the Arab world and in that context what is happening in Sudan is not at all surprising.

There are no democracies whatever in the Arab world, and military or monarchical tyrannies are the norm. Moreover, they collaborate to maintain the status quo. Move along, please. There's nothing new to see here.